



The Banshee's Comb (MLSIT 4026): The Role of Tellers and Audiences in the Shaping of Redactions and Variations

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THE BANSHEE'S COMB
(MLSIT 4026)

*The role of tellers and audiences in the shaping of
redactions and variations*

PATRICIA LYSAGHT

I

A detailed analysis of the legend here entitled *The Banshee's Comb*, forms part of a previous study of the traditional beliefs and legends about the Irish supernatural death-messenger commonly called the banshee (Lysaght 1986).¹ In this short survey some further comments on the age of the legend, its variations and their causes are made, hitherto unpublished variants of the legend are presented, and additional contextual data about some narrators, the narration occasions and the audiences are provided.

In the earlier study the legend was analysed against the wide contextual background of the predominant traits in the death-messenger complex, of attitudes to supernatural beings in general and to the supernatural death-messenger in particular, and also as one of a trilogy of legends concerning interference with the supernatural death-messenger.² It was, called simply *The Comb Legend*, since a comb figures in the vast majority of the variants, and since it is usually obvious that the comb belongs to the supernatural death-messenger. Since the legend is discussed in isolation in the present

1 See in particular 154-81, App. 4, 313-5 and notes 391-4.

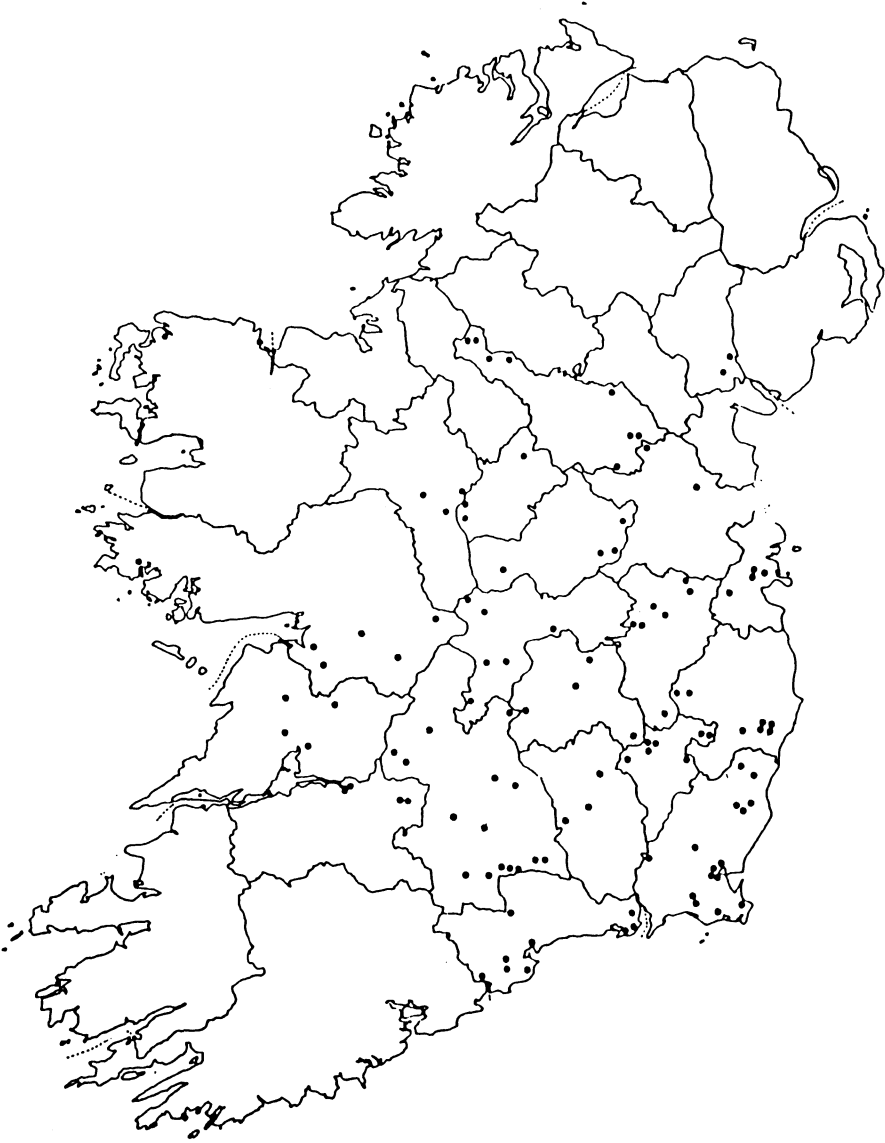
2 For a discussion of the folk beliefs about the insulted death-messenger and for an analysis of two further interference legends, *The Imprint of the Banshee's Five Fingers* and *The Shirt Legend*, see Lysaght 1986, 182-90, and 316-20 for texts.

study, however, and since all but ten variants³ mention the banshee as the supernatural actor, it is justifiable for the sake of clarity here to call it The Banshee's Comb. Nevertheless, in order to take into account the variants that contain other dialect names for the supernatural actor, such as *badhb*, *bibe* and *bow*, the generic term 'supernatural death-messenger', or simply 'death-messenger', will be used to describe the supernatural being who is one of the two principal actors in all variants of the legend.⁴

II

Eighty-one variants of the legend stemming from east-Munster, Leinster, south Ulster and Connacht have been analysed already.⁵ To this number we now add two further variants, one from Co. Kildare and the other from Co. Carlow, which were collected in 1937 and 1950 respectively.⁶ They fall into the previously established distribution patterns of the legend and its redactions. The Banshee's Comb has obviously developed around the core of belief that the death-messenger is often engaged in combing her hair. This belief (see Map A on the opposite page)⁷ is strongest in most of Leinster and contiguous areas of east Munster (Tipperary and Waterford), and it is consequently there that we find the heartland of the legend's distribution (69 variants).

- 3 The ten variants are found in the following sources: IFC S 846:217 (Kilkenny 14), *bochaoideacháin*; IFC S 845:342 (Kilkenny 16), *badhb* IFC 544: 209 (Wexford 4), 'bow'; IFC S 880: 339 (Wexford 30), 'bow'; *Enniscorthy Guardian*, 14 Oct. 1967 (Wexford 35), 'bow'; *Wexford People*, 16 July 1976 (Wexford 37), 'bow'; IFC S 924: 75 (Wicklow 13), 'bow'; IFC S 643:99 (Waterford 10), 'bibe'; IFC 696: 233 (Waterford 40), 'bibe'; IFC S 655: 173-4 (Waterford 50), 'bibe'; All these texts are given in Lysaght 1986 under their respective counties App. 5, 321-61.
- 4 For the incidence of the dialect names 'bibe' and 'bow' and also *bochaointeacháin* (in the form *bochaoideacháin*), see previous note.
- 5 See note 1.
- 6 IFC S 774:408 and IFC 1253:101. To the existing list of variants in Lysaght 1986, App. 4. 1(a), 313, should also be added Wex. 37 (P), and the entry Gal. 56 M in this list should read Gal. 55 (M).
- 7 The caption of this map in Lysaght 1986, 98, should read – 'References to combing her hair in legends *not* included'.



Map A: The Banshee combs her hair
(References to her combing her hair in legends not included)

The Banshee's Comb is part of the living folk tradition and can still be collected in parts of Ireland.⁸ A printed variant from Westmeath confirms that it was known in Leinster towards the end of the nineteenth century (Bardon 1891, 82). In all probability, however, it existed long before that in its core area. If the transmission chains provided for some oral variants from Waterford are to be relied upon, it appears likely that the legend was also known in the south-east of Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁹

III

All variants of the legend, from the earliest printed ones to those most recently recorded, show The Banshee's Comb to be a fully developed story with close-knit construction and a surprise effect. It may thus be termed a *fabulate*. In view of its contents it may be called a belief legend, and in view of its geographical distribution known to date it might be termed a migratory legend, though found only within Ireland. Type Number MLSIT 4026 has been suggested for it.

- 8 It is still well known in Co. Laois, and no doubt in other areas of the heartland of the legend's distribution as well. The combing motif and the prohibition on picking up lost combs because they might belong to the banshee, is still strong even in recent inner city Dublin traditions as evinced by the Urban Folklore Project 1979-80. Nevertheless, the legend of The Banshee's Comb is not, to my knowledge, so far represented there.
- 9 In an account from Co. Waterford (IFC 696: 233-5) the informant who was 74 years old at the date of telling, states that she had heard it from her uncle sixty years previously (i.e. 1880), who was then 70 years of age. He would thus have been born c. 1810 and may well have heard the legend in his youth. In another account from Co. Waterford (IFC 1710: 436-7, the writer states that he heard the legend as a boy of eight in 1928 from a man who was then 73 years old (i.e. born 1855), who had heard it from his own father in 1863, who thus would have been born in the early decades of the century. The Co. Waterford tradition is very cohesive and has some prominent traits such as the threefold cry (see Lysaght 1986, 77-9) and while we cannot point to a specific origin place for the legend (or indeed for the banshee belief), it is perhaps not surprising that the oldest life histories of the legend known to date spring from Co. Waterford.

The legend has two main contrasting characters, the female supernatural death-messenger and a human actor, usually, but not invariably a man. It consists of two main episodes, relating:

- 1 how an object, usually a comb, belonging to the supernatural death-messenger is either stolen from her by the human actor, or lost by her and accidentally found by the human actor;
- 2 how she recovers it.

The majority of the variants are fairly short – indeed a few are so short that they can be told in less than half a minute – but there are also some elaborate variants, one of which is discussed below.

IV

There are two main forms of the legend, which we will refer to as the A-redaction and the B-redaction.¹⁰

The A-redaction of which I know 61 variants,¹¹ contains an initial encounter between the human actor and the death-messenger. It is stated or implied in the majority of the variants (45)¹² that violence was involved since the comb or other object is taken forcibly from the death-messenger, a trait exemplified in the following variant (IFC S 924: 74 = Wicklow 12) collected by a Wicklow schoolgirl in 1937:

One night a man by the name of Holm[els] was going to his home in Ca... He was after being in town and he was drunk. When he was going across a short cut he saw a bow sitting on a stile combing her hair. He ran up to her and took the comb from her. He went home and went to bed. Some time in the night he was awakened by the crying of

10 For detailed analysis of The Banshee's Comb redactions see Lysaght 1986, 167-81.

11 See references in Lysaght 1986, App. 4.1(b), 313. To this list should be added the additional Co. Carlow A-redaction variant (IFC 1253: 101).

12 See references in Lysaght 1986, App. 4, 1(c), 314. To this list add: Dub. 6, Gal. 41, Wex. 4, and two unprovenanced variants from *Ireland's Own* listed in App. 4. 1(a), 313. Lao. 12 should be deleted.

the bow. He was troubled when he heard this, so next day he went and asked the priest. The priest listened to his story, and when he was finished the priest told him to give back the comb to the bow through the window with the tongs. Holmes did as he was told. When the bow came the next [night] he gave her back the comb just as [he] was told. As she was taking the comb she also took the two feet of the tongs. If he had given back the comb with his hands, she would have taken his hands also. After that night the bow was never seen again.

In the other sixteen variants within the A-redaction, force is not used, but rather the death-messenger is startled or intimidated by the human protagonist so that she runs away and leaves her comb behind her. The following recently discovered Co. Carlow variant (IFC 1253:101) forming part of a reply to a questionnaire on river fords issued by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1950, illustrates this:

But all local fords are said to have been frequented by the 'Banshee', and she was often seen on moonlight nights sitting on the stepping stones combing her hair and *caoin*-ing. She is said to have frequently sat on one in Pooleen about two miles from Ballymurphy. A local man approached her one night and she ran leaving her golden comb behind. He took the comb and she came nightly to *caoin* round his home. He was advised to give her back the comb through the window by holding it towards her in a tongs. He did so and she took the comb and the claws of the tongs and was never heard again. It is believed that had he handed her the comb she would have taken the hands off him.¹³

In contrast to the A-redaction, the B-redaction lacks an initial encounter, no violence ensues, and, instead, the comb

13 For the sixteen further variants referring to a non-violent initial encounter with the death-messenger see Lysaght 1986, 313(d); delete Ros. 81 from this list.

is said to have been accidentally found. The following previously unnoticed example collected by a Co. Kildare schoolboy from his mother in 1937 (IFC S 774: 408), illustrates this:

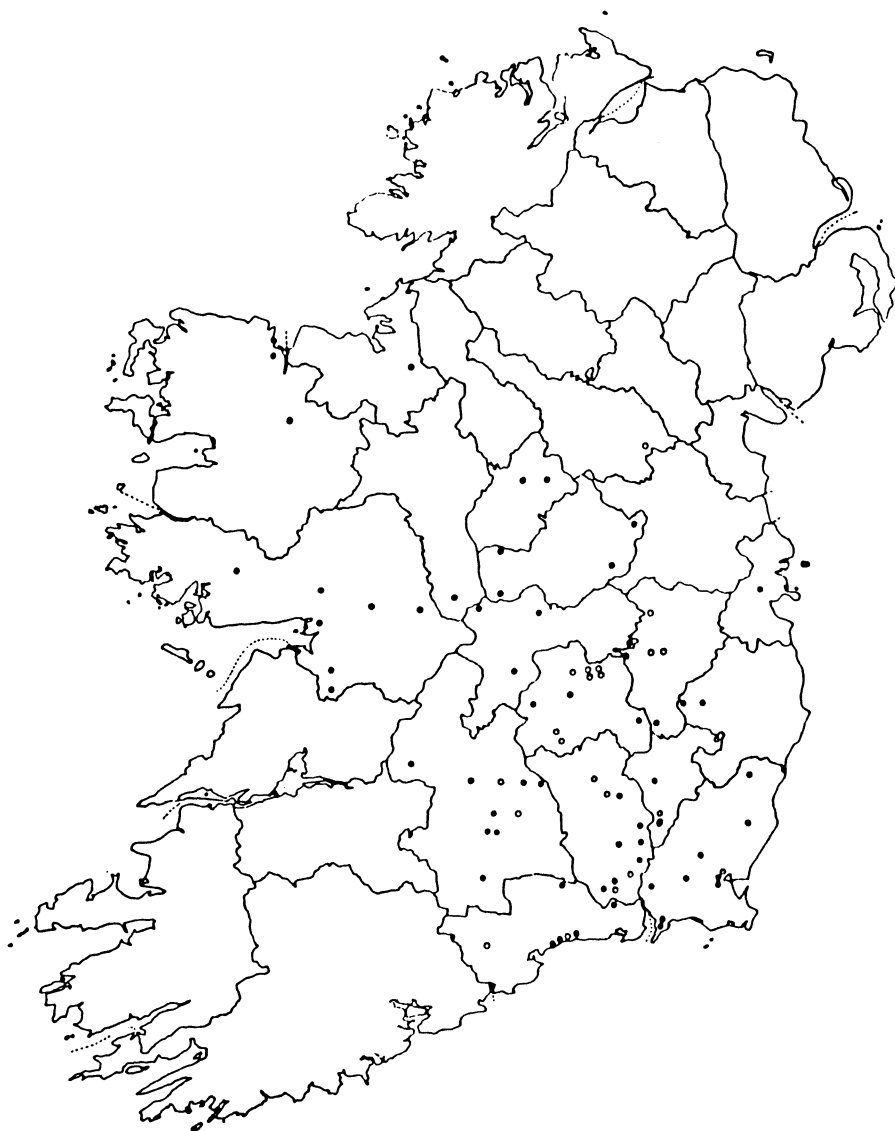
A banshee left her comb on the window. A boy got the comb and the next night the banshee came for her comb. The boy was afraid at first to give it to her but later on he gave it to her on a tongs. She took the comb and took the boy's finger away with it.¹⁴

The A-redaction appears to be the older of the two. It is attested in the nineteenth century (Bardon 1891, 82) and is more widely distributed than the B-redaction and is found also in outlying areas in Connacht and south Ulster (see Map B on the next page); it is also subject to more substantial variation than the B-redaction. In the periphery of its distribution, hybridisation has occurred with legends such as the Imprint of the Banshee's Five Fingers, found in mid- and south-Galway, which is another interference legend dealt with in my earlier study (Lysaght 1986). A rather poor variant of the legend from Co. Roscommon (IFC 2112:96-8)¹⁵ has resulted from an exceptional hybridisation with another migratory legend, ML 4080, The Seal Maiden, or as it might be more aptly entitled in Ireland, Man Marries Mermaid. This is a legend which is very common in western coastal areas, and its existence may well have hindered the advance of The Banshee's Comb westwards.¹⁶ This legend also involves a clash between a female supernatural being combing her hair, the mermaid, and a male human actor. An object, usually not her comb, but something which is vital in

14 There are a further 21 variants of the B-redaction; see Lysaght 1986, 314(e).

15 = Ros. 23 in Lysaght 1986, 351.

16 See Lysaght 1986, 159-163. Map 18,162, shows the confrontational distribution patterns of these two legends. Additionally, in Counties Cork and Kerry the belief that the death-messenger cannot be seen, but only heard, has formed a barrier to the south-western spread of the legend; see Lysaght 1986, 159-63 in this connection.



Map B: The Banshee's Comb redactions
● A – redaction
○ B – redaction

a maritime habitat, is stolen from her, brought home and hidden. Here the similarity with *The Banshee's Comb* ceases, however, since the recovery process is completely different.

That hybridisation and variation need not, however, necessarily lead to deterioration and lack of cohesion in legends, but that it can be, rather, a dynamic and creative process, is clearly illustrated by a remarkable variant of *The Banshee's Comb* dealt with in my earlier study. It was collected by Seán Ó Flannagáin, full-time collector for the Irish Folklore Commission¹⁷, from a Co. Galway farmer, Séamus Ó Cealla, Parish of Killeen, in the Clare/Galway border area in 1937. This variant results from interaction with yet another interference legend entitled *The Shirt Legend* whose core area is limited to part of Co. Galway (Lysaght 1986, 187-90, 317-20). The motif of the violent pursuit of the human actor by the beetle-winged banshee, typical of *The Shirt Legend*, is skilfully woven into the main fabric of *The Banshee's Comb* in this variant, which is outstanding mainly by virtue of its extremely close and well-knit construction.¹⁸ It depicts the banshee as a washerwoman with a beetle in one hand and a comb in the other; O'Regan, the human protagonist, snatches the comb from her, leaps swiftly across a stream and sets off homewards with utmost speed. A dramatic pursuit by the beetle-wielding banshee across bog and swamp ensues in the direction of O'Regan's house. But the local hero, running faster than the March wind, manages to avoid the beetle which the pursuing, screaming banshee throws at him, and to reach the safety of his house just as the banshee throws the beetle for the third time and strikes the gable of the house splitting it 'in two even halves'.

A legend with so much local colour had strong entertainment potential for a local audience. The extent it achieved that potential on any given occasion is undoubtedly also linked to the circumstances of the telling occasion in

17 Seán Ó Flannagáin worked for the Irish Folklore Commission as a full-time collector in north-Clare and south-Galway from 1.10.1937 to 31.1.1940.

18 This variant is printed in Lysaght 1986, 164-7; (= Gal. 41, *ibid.*, 337).

question, the character and expectations of the audience, and the personality and skill of the storyteller. Although we have no direct evidence of the entertainment level achieved by the legend on any occasion that it was told, nevertheless, there is sufficient circumstantial information to indicate that the legend was very much appreciated by those who heard it.

From Ó Flannagáin's diary notes it seems clear that Ó Cealla's house was a 'rambling' house, where neighbours gathered at night and where storytelling sessions were held. Although Ó Flannagáin made no diary entry on the 8th September 1937 – the date on which he recorded the legend on the ediphone – it is unlikely that the telling occasion in Ó Cealla's house on that night was very much different from that described by him some time later when he writes: 'over with me to Séamas Ó Cealla's house in Killeen. There is a good crowd here tonight and although Seán has a cold he tells his stories into the ediphone...' ¹⁹ Ó Flannagáin then goes on to describe other tradition bearers present as firm believers in the supernatural world and, indeed, many of the other narratives recorded from Seán on the occasion that he told the Banshee's Comb, deal also with the supernatural. ²⁰ Ó Flannagáin also describes Ó Cealla's wife, from whom he recorded fairy legends, as a firm believer in the supernatural. ²¹ In his diary notes (*ibid.*, 18) Ó Flannagáin also describes the storyteller, Ó Cealla, as a very humorous man, and from biographical details in some of his other narratives it seems that he, too, like the local hero in the legend, was a harum-scarum character and familiar also with the local peat bogs. His audience, too, was probably familiar with the turbary surroundings in which the legend is set since one of Ó Cealla's escapades – told to Ó Flannagáin on the same occasion that he told The Banshee's Comb – is set in a peat bog with himself as the main actor, and involves also other

19 IFC 566: 18 (4th October 1937). The full-time collectors for the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-71) were obliged to keep a daily account of their work.

20 These other narratives are found in IFC 404: 114-39.

21 Mentioned in his diary (IFC 566: 19), 5 Oct. 1937.

local characters, who may well have been present in the audience as he told *The Banshee's Comb*.²²

Therefore, in narrating the legend of the banshee's rack²³ with the obvious skill and gusto which Ó Flannagáin's sensitive transcription captures for us on the printed page, Ó Cealla was performing a legend which in terms of its content was undoubtedly much to the taste and entertainment of both himself and his audience, and which also perhaps expressed his own and his audience's fantasies. In addition, in terms of its length, its folktale-like runs, formulae and stylistic ornaments, as well as its local setting and its predominant supernatural elements²⁴, the legend was well suited to the formal storytelling sessions which took place in Ó Cealla's house.

The B-redaction is much less frequently attested (22 variants)²⁵, than the A-redaction as it represents only twenty-five per cent of the variants. It is also less widely distributed being found only in the core area (see Map B). It is invariably shorter and involves less substantial variation than the A-redaction. Because of the lack of the initial encounter typical of the A-redaction, there is little scope for variation in the opening scene, and the drama of the B-redaction is concentrated on the second episode, i.e. the return of the comb (or other object) to the death-messenger. However, the B-redaction should not be regarded as inferior to the A-redaction; the story makes perfectly good sense also in the shorter B-redaction form.

22 This narrative is entitled 'The Day we all ran home out of Pullough Bog' in IFC 404: 129-34.

23 It is entitled 'The Banshee's Rack' in the manuscript, see note 24 above.

24 Clearly Ó Cealla liked to narrate legends with a strong supernatural content; see e.g. the narration entitled *The Evil Cat* in IFC 404: 114-18, told, it would seem, immediately after *The Banshee's Rack*, on Oct. 8, 1937.

25 See Lysaght 1986, 314, (e). Add the variant in IFC S 774: 408 (Co. Kildare) to this list.

V

In assessing the two redactions the gender factor may be relevant. The preference for one redaction over the other may depend on the sex and age of the tellers, or on the sex and age of the main human actor and on the composition of audience. Those variants within the A-redaction where violence is implied in the initial encounter, were usually told by men in the whole area of its distribution. Almost 75% of the narrators were adult males and in all but three variants (in each of which a woman figures),²⁶ the main human actor is a male, usually an adult. It seems that the narrators themselves may have felt that it was inappropriate for a female to be involved in an aggressive situation since one of the three records, which actually mentions a woman, states that she was a 'wild girl' (IFC S 555:10); and another explains the woman's aggressive action by stating that she thought the death-messenger was her own mother covered by a shawl who was playing a trick on her (IFC 2112:169-71).

Though the human actor is always a man in the variants within the A-redaction in which the initial encounter with the death-messenger lacks the element of physical violence, it is noteworthy that women figure more prominently as *narrators* of these variants than men.²⁷ This is hardly due to an accident of the collecting process but rather explicable in the light of the considerations outlined above.

The variants within the B-redaction, both those collected by adults and by children are, as we have seen, characterised by a total lack of an initial encounter. These variants too are told somewhat more often by women than by men.²⁸ The main human actor may also be a child (2 variants; Lysaght 1986, 392 note 15) or a woman (6 variants; *ibid.*, note 14). The violent behaviour in the

26 IFC S 555: 10 (Co. Tipperary); IFC 2112: 169-71 (Co. Westmeath); IFC S 544: 339-40 (Co. Wexford).

27 Women are narrators in nine variants as compared to eight in which men figure. The remaining variants are unspecific as regards the sex of the narrator.

28 Women are narrators in twelve variants and men in ten.

majority of the variants within the A-redaction has obviously been considered inappropriate for women or children.

As stated earlier, we meet with variation within the A-redaction in regard to the object taken from the death-messenger mainly in peripheral areas, especially in Galway and Mayo. Variation within both redactions also arises from omission of details, for instance the name of the human actor is missing in more than half of the variants. This may be due to inability to report correctly what was told particularly, perhaps, in many variants collected by school children;²⁹ but the omission may also reflect the moribund state of the tradition, a circumstance which may be particularly applicable to accounts even when given by adults in questionnaire replies, letters and field-recordings made over the last decade or so.³⁰

Many details in the redactions reflect different conditions of life of the society in which they were told. Some refer to common human concerns such as sitting up with a dying person or attending a wake, or common country activities or pastimes such as rambling, dancing and cardplaying (Lysaght 1986, 392, note 16). Such details are especially to the fore in variants within the A-redaction, since they explain why the banshee might be roaming around, or why the man is out at times and in places associated in popular belief with the supernatural. Hybridisation has already been discussed as a factor causing variation within the A-redaction. This is particularly prevalent in peripheral western areas and we have already noted that variants of the legend in Co. Galway have been influenced by different local beliefs and legends.

29 See Lysaght 1986, 314 (g). Lao. 21 (S) in the list given there should read Lao. 22(S).

30 There are fourteen replies from such sources which contain an unnamed human actor.

VI

So far we have concentrated mainly on the initial episode in which the human actor gets possession of the death-messenger's comb etc. We have dealt with the main variations discernible in the legend forms and with contextual details. In most variants, however, the climax of the legend is reached when the death-messenger arrives at the house seeking her comb. The main stages in the retrieval process are fairly stable: the death-messenger is heard crying for her comb; it is returned to her by means of an iron implement, usually a tongs, which is stretched out through the window to her; she grabs the comb and damages the implement. Nevertheless, the narrator has considerable scope for variation: a supporting human actor, for example, may be introduced to advise on how the comb should be returned to the demanding and threatening supernatural being. This can be a family member, or an old person who knows the dangers involved in situations where children have found combs. It is often the priest, however, who advises on the restorative procedure (Lysaght 1986, 172). The object is usually returned by means of an iron tongs, but in some areas, mainly peripheral ones, the poker, the ploughshare and the fork, and more commonly, the shovel and spade – these latter items being every bit as practical as the tongs for lifting the comb – have been substituted. All these objects were made of iron and therefore shared the apotropaic propensities of the tongs. Most of them would also have been kept in the house and were thus readily available in an emergency.³¹

Variation also occurs in relation to the apertures used when returning the comb (Lysaght 1986, 173, Map 21). The window is mentioned most often, and since it conforms to the patterns of general beliefs about the manifestation places of

31 Lysaght 1986, 174-6. A Co. Clare account (IFC 1371: 261) states that the ploughshare was often kept in the loft in the house over the winter. The ploughshare was a detachable and valuable part of the plough. The belief that one should not put a spade or shovel on one's shoulder in the house may indicate that these implements were kept in the kitchen in some areas.

the death-messenger, and is found over the whole distribution area of the legend, one may take it that it is old and firmly rooted in tradition. However, the door is also occasionally mentioned and then the comb is returned either through the door which has been opened 'a few inches', or under it.

The extent to which the contextual framework may be varied without interference with the structural unity of the legend is illustrated by a unique variant from Co. Longford. By careful elaboration of the contextual details the travelling woman, Oney Power, skilfully adapts her variant to the conditions imposed by nomadic life.³² The house which features in the variants of the settled community is replaced by the camp-fire, and since travellers usually sit by the campfire at night, it is hardly surprising that this is where the banshee comes looking for her comb. The fire offers protection to the traveller just as the house does for the other protagonists and the comb is given back to the banshee in the usual way by using a tongs (Lysaght 1986, 176).

The majority of narrators include the motif of damage to the iron implement used to return the comb (Lysaght 1986, 176-8). The death-messenger warps or twists the solid iron object and thus displays her extraordinary strength.³³ Some Galway and Mayo variants state that she leaves the print of her five fingers on the implement. This trait has been borrowed from an interference legend already discussed.³⁴

From the descriptions of the damage done to the implement it would be easy for the audience to envisage what would have happened if the human had put out his hand instead. Nevertheless, some narrators make express statements such as, 'if he had taken it in his hand to give it to her, she would have taken his hand from him' (Lysaght 1986, 178). Only occasionally and atypically have narrators stated

32 For a biographical note on her, see Gmelch and Kroup 1978, 38-9.

33 The motif of extraordinary strength expressed through deformation of iron objects is also found in the migratory legend entitled *The Visit to the Old Troll: The Handshake*, where it is frequently included in a longer tale, *The Dream Visit*. It is possible that the twisting of the iron in *The Banshee's Comb* is a borrowing from *The Dream Visit*.

34 See Lysaght 1986, 178, 182-6, 316; see also IFC S 774: 408 (Co. Kildare).

that the human actor actually suffered physical harm (Lysaght 1986,176).

VII

The amount of variation in *The Banshee's Comb* is such that it has not been possible to survey it in all its aspects or discuss all the possible reasons for it. Among our main findings are the following: two main redactions of the legend have been identified. In the A-redaction the comb etc. is taken from the supernatural death-messenger following an encounter with her, while in the B-redaction it is found accidentally by the human protagonist.

The distribution of the respective redactions has also been ascertained. The wider geographical distribution of the A-redaction and the greater variation in length and content of the variants of *The Banshee's Comb* within that redaction, lend some support to the view that it is the older and more original redaction of the legend. However, the B-redaction also occurs in the heartland of the total distribution area of the legend and the preference for one form over the other may in fact be gender related.

The different collectors and collecting situations – ranging from experienced collectors with their recording apparatus blending unobtrusively with the audience, to the more usual one-to-one-collector-and-informant situations, or to the homework-oriented collecting of the Primary School children who collected folklore from their parents and community in the 1937-8 Schools' Scheme – have all left their imprint on the archival variants of the legend.

Finally, the personalities, tastes and gender of the narrators and of their audiences have all been significant in the shaping of redaction and variation in *The Banshee's Comb*.